

Applying phenomenography to development aid: Should we recognise and embrace complexity in aid practice?

Christopher David Nelson
Institute for Sustainable Futures
University of Technology, Sydney

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

Christopher David Nelson

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'CD Nelson', is written above a horizontal line.

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Relevant publications

Nelson, C., Bryce, P. & Willetts, J., *Transdisciplinarity and Development Research: Finding a new pathway to old problems*, AEGIS Conference, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, 29 June 2005.

Nelson, C., Bryce, P. & Willetts, J., *Transdisciplinary Research and Mozambique: Finding a new pathway to old problems*. African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) Conference, UNE, Armidale, 25-27 November 2005.

Nelson, C., Bryce, P. & Willetts, J., *Researching development practice as a complex learning process*, The 12th Annual International Sustainable Development Research Conference, Hong Kong, April 6-8, 2006.

Benn, S. & Nelson, C., *A Decentred Approach to Sustainability: Sustainable Development as Evolutionary Learning*, Business as an Agent of World Benefit (BAWB) Forum, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 22-25 October, 2006.

Nelson, C., Bryce, P. & Willetts, J., *A Different Way of Looking at Development Aid: Phenomenographic Stream*, Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Incorporated (ACSPRI), Conference, Sydney University, 10-13 December, 2006.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AusAID	– Australian Agency for International Development
CLUSA	– Cooperative League of the United States of America
CPT	– Communicative Planning Theory
CST	– Critical Systems Thinking
DFID	– Department for International Development of the British Government
FARG	– Focal Area Reference Group
GAPI	– Gabinete de Consultoria e Apoio a Pequena Industria
HDI	– Human Development Index
IFAD	– International Fund for Agricultural Development
IGOs	– International Governmental Organisations
IMF	– International Monetary Fund
INDER	– National Institute for Rural Development
INGO	– International Non-Government Organisation
ISF	– Institute for Sustainable Futures
Logframe	– Logical Framework
LoNAT	– Local Needs Assessment Team
M&E	– Monitoring and Evaluation
MDGs	– Millennium Development Goals
MfDR	– Managing for Development Results
MTR	– Mid-term Review
OECD	– Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAMA	– Programa de Apoio aos Mercados Agrícolas
PCR	– Program Completion Report
PRA	– Participatory Rapid Appraisal
RBM	– Results Based Management
UNDP	– United Nations Development Program
UNOPS	– United Nations Office for Project Services
ZPD	– Zone of Proximal Development

Abstract

This thesis is about extending understanding of international development aid. It is motivated by a belief that the current approach is caught in a spiral of self-interest and reductionist rhetoric. I argue that our understanding of development aid is limited by an inability to foster a culture informed by failure, learning, reflection and evolution. In development aid enormous cultural, political and social assumptions are made about concepts of change. These are rarely investigated to explore what the assumptions mean for different stakeholders, how they are perceived, and why they might hinder rather than enhance change.

Accordingly, my thesis is about extending the parameters of development research, moving it outside its traditional fields of enquiry, and looking at how new methodological approaches can broaden our understanding of how it works.

I apply a learning methodology to an international development aid intervention to explore the practical and conceptual ways individuals conceive of and relate to development aid. An integrated agricultural development case study in Mozambique is used to illustrate the variety of ways that different stakeholders relate to a development program. A learning methodology (phenomenography) is used to highlight the important differences in how stakeholders relate to a given phenomena (the program) and to establish a hierarchy of awareness that articulates the significant variations in stakeholder experiences. These variations have considerable consequence for our understanding of international development aid.

My thesis proposes that a critical systems theory approach be employed in dealing with development aid and its 'wicked problems'. Given the limitations of the existing aid delivery mechanisms, the research uses a discordant pluralist approach as a guiding principle towards shaping new approaches to development practice. The research illustrates the significance of learning to development aid and argues that new methodologies should be employed to apply learning to the development process.

My research highlights the limitations of current perspectives on and approaches to development aid. It challenges the focus on 'poverty alleviation' as the principle driver for contemporary development practice, and argues for a focus informed by learning and

reflection. In identifying the basis for this new focus, the thesis takes a transdisciplinary approach to illustrate the essential components of how development aid works. The research draws on the academic fields of management theory, planning theory and learning theory and explores how they have been appropriated by existing development paradigms. It investigates how these theories are currently applied and argues for a broader application of their merits in undertaking development interventions.

By investigating and understanding how ‘learning’ is applied in a development aid context, we ensure that the process of design, evaluation and delivery can be tied to experiential outcomes. These outcomes provide a rich source of reflective input into how we might perceive ‘effective’ development aid. The thesis does not provide a prescription for ‘appropriate’ aid interventions. What it does attempt to do is ask why we need to think more about the learning component of development practice, and to consider how we might develop a framework that enhances the experience of recipients and practitioners alike. To do this, we need to start thinking about designing an environment where learning takes place, identify how it occurs, how it is represented and how it can be recorded to enhance development practice.